

Washington, DC — This week Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) visited local service organizations that treat mental illness, substance abuse and developmental disorders to push for mental health parity and to highlight what he has done in Congress already to address this issue. Congressman Sestak toured Eagleville Hospital, Elwyn, and the Don Guanella School.

“Mental illness, including substance abuse, is one of the leading disabilities in America— about one in four adults suffer from diagnosable mental illness. Yet, two-thirds of those with mental illnesses do not receive any treatment or services for these diseases,” noted Joe. “We have great organizations right here in the 7th district that provide excellent care, but individuals cannot access this care as long as our health plans continue to deny fair and equal coverage for mental health care.”

To bring equity to the treatment of mental illness and substance abuse, Congressman Sestak has partnered with Congressman Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) to push for passage of H.R. 1424, the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, which expands the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996 to require group health plans that offer benefits for mental health and addiction to do so on the same terms as care for other diseases. The legislation closes the loopholes that allow plans to charge high copayments, coinsurance, deductibles, and maximum out-of-pocket limits and impose lower day and visit limits on mental health addiction care.

Joe recently held a forum on Mental Health and Substance Abuse Equity with Congressman Kennedy at Elwyn, which provides services for individuals with mental illness as well as developmental disorders. At the forum, Congressman Kennedy spoke of his own struggles with substance abuse and the importance of ensuring individuals get the treatment they need.

Congressman Sestak and Congressman Kennedy have also successfully offered two amendments to H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act, which will improve mental health care for our wounded soldiers. The first amendment highlights the fact that mental health care is an essential component to the medical services offered to our Veterans and the members of our Armed Services by clarifying that ‘medical care’ as defined in H.R. 1538 includes mental health care services. The second amendment requires the Secretary of the Department of Defense to develop a plan to help prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other stress-related psychopathologies (including substance abuse conditions) from developing in our military service members. In addition, it requires the Secretary to submit to Congress within 180 days a plan for establishing a Peer-Reviewed research program within the Defense Health Program’s research and development function to research the prevention of

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and how to best strengthen the psychological resiliency of our military service members. Both amendments passed with unanimous support.

“Left untreated, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can ultimately lead to other problems, including drug and alcohol abuse,” added Joe. “We can no longer afford to look at physical care and mental health care as two separate entities – with physical care as ‘legitimate’ and ‘mental health care’ as something less than that, and my amendments bring a much-needed spotlight on the problem.”

These amendments came out of a recent conversation Congressman Sestak had with a doctor at the VA Medical Center in Coatesville, PA who works with and treats veterans with PTSD. The doctor emphasized to Joe his concerns about the level of resources, attention, and the scope of care available to those who need mental health services. This is why, in addition to these two amendments, Congressman Sestak is also working on additional legislation addressing the funding of PTSD and quality reporting of medical care by DOD and the VA.

“Limiting access to good mental-health and addiction care is not just unfair, it’s unwise,” added Joe.

This week’s tours included Eagleville Hospital, which is dedicated to the treatment, education, and prevention of substance abuse and co-occurring disorders; Elwyn, which is a non-profit human services organization that provides education and rehabilitation services for individuals with mental illness, special challenges and disadvantages; and the Don Guanella School, which provides education services for young men and boys who have diagnosis of mental retardation or other developmental impairments, including mental illness.

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "DeepBlue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking*

*former military officer ever elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.*

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